

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Development of Speaking Skills using the Immersion Teaching Model: A Case Study of a 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Greek Primary Class in a EFL Context

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## Abstract:

This paper investigates the development of students' speaking skills, using the Immersion Teaching Model (ITM) as a form of process differentiation. It aims to explore whether the ITM intervention in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context will have an impact on the students' speech development and motivation, and will furthermore investigate its feasibility as a teaching approach. A 5th Grade class of a Greek state Primary school was used and action research was implemented. The research findings revealed enhancement of the speaking skills for the students that have at least an initial level of language speaking competence, but no difference was detected for the students of no speaking competence, indicating the need for further differentiation. However, the ITM intervention was proven feasible to use in the EFL classroom and highly affective to student motivation. The implications of the present research for the EFL context have shown that the ITM is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse educational needs, and benefit meaningful speech production if appropriately applied.

**Keywords:** Differentiated Instruction, Language Immersion, Immersion Teaching Model, Speaking skills, Action Research

## Introduction

Language immersion is a general term that describes the exposure of the learner exclusively to the target language, in order to develop bilingualism and is flexible enough to adapt to various sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts (Cummins, 2012) which is the reason why it is so widely used. In the Greek educational reality, language immersion is defined through Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), although it is not widely applied (see Zafiri & Zouganeli, 2017). This paper is a study of how a language immersion approach called the Immersion Teaching Model (ITM), used by Luan and Guo (2011) adopts the basic principles of Language Immersion, which may benefit the speech production of a Greek EFL classroom. The present study assembled an Action Research (AR) applying the ITM (Luan & Guo, 2011) and Mangubhai's (2006) suggestions, as a form of process differentiated instruction, with the purpose to investigate the development, of the speaking skills, of a specific class of 5th grade students, aiming at catering for their low speech production. This small scale research also probes into the feasibility of the ITM, as well as students' motivation. The results show a significant rise on students' motivation and an enhancement on their speech production, although students of low speaking competence were not affected.

## Theoretical foundation

### *EFL teaching in the Greek State Primary sector*

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language was formally introduced to the Greek Primary School curriculum as late as 1993, before which the language was pilot taught for about two years (Okpe, 2014). Nowadays, all primary State Schools include compulsory English as a foreign Language (EFL) lessons that start from the first grade through to the sixth grade as part of a program called English for Young Learners (EYL) that aspires to include English language teaching in all primary school levels as part of a progression to the New School or the 21st century School as it is called, which is in line with the Integrated Foreign Languages Curriculum (IFLC) (PEAP, 2014), which became the official curriculum in 2016, and upon which this small scale research will focus.

When it comes to the speaking skill, the IFLC (2011) is in line with the Communicative Approach to language teaching which, as described by Richards (2012), encourages the teacher to design lessons that will produce meaningful communicative interaction among the students and is learner centered. It is thus one of the curriculum's main objectives to encourage the teacher to create new material or adapt the existing one, in order to achieve the outlined educational goals.

### *The teaching of speaking to Young Learners*

Gardner (1993), in his theory of multiple intelligences, suggests that humans possess different types of intelligences that allow them to infer to the world around them in different ways and at a different pace. This realization calls for attention to the teaching procedure, the teaching techniques and materials, in order to achieve the maximum benefit for the teaching of speaking skills. Therefore, a vital parameter for the language classroom is to manipulate Young Learners' (YL) desires for interplay and use this interplay to improve their conditions of speaking exchange, as according to Cameron (2007, p. 21) "development can be seen as internalizing from social interaction". This stance is further supported by Vygotsky (1978) in his theory of Social Constructivism which manifests that learning takes place through interaction within the social context in which the learner exists. More specifically, the teacher must develop the appropriate classroom environment through group work, collaboration activities and teacher support that will drive the students to produce spoken discourse and achieve the educational goals which have been set.

At this point, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of motivation in language learning in general and in speech production in particular. As Dekeyser (2009) states, one of the most important characteristics of learners, which affects second language (L2) learning, is motivation- or the lack of it. Motivation is interconnected with several aspects of a learner's characteristics which direct the teacher to organize the lessons around them. For this reason, an important part of research is to examine the potential of the Immersion Teaching Model to spur the learners' confidence -and therefore reduce anxiety and enhance motivation- and improve speaking production as was similarly outlined by Boonkit (2010) in his research on the effective factors of speech production among Thai EFL students.

The advancement of speech production is greatly influenced, although most of the times taken for granted, by the opportunities that the learner has to practice spoken discourse. Haradasht and Aidinlou (2016, p. 1764) examine, in contrast, the disadvantage of a teacher- centered classroom, where most of the speech acts are produced by the teacher, and the advantage of the learner-centered classroom, where the focus is on the development of their communicative competence through activities "such as role play, repetition, discussion, and the like". In a similar fashion, Immersion language promotes the highest amount of English language use by the student, as it is crucial for the learners to be given as many opportunities as possible to produce meaningful speech that will not only benefit their progress as speakers of the English language, but will also positively affect the overall interwoven knowledge of the other three language skills.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Borja et.al, (2015) describe DI as a form of class intervention that was initially employed to attend to the educational needs of gifted children that the traditional instruction was not able to cover. Careful consideration of classroom characteristics resulted in acknowledging the academic diversity that exists in it

(Tomlinson et al., 2003). This is evident in the Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum (IFLC) (2011; PEAP, 2014), where it states clearly that the foreign language class must be designed to cater and integrate the sociocultural differences that are becoming evident, as well as the students' individual differences in learning.

Tomlinson (2001, p.4), who has researched and analyzed the approach, defines it as the adaptation of the "content, process and product" that a teacher implements in the classroom so that the educational needs of the students are met. As Tomlinson (1999) states, mixed ability classes were a reality long before they were named in linguistic circles, which by necessity led teachers to alter their teaching practices to accommodate emerging parameters, in order to achieve a meaningful teaching and learning experience. Since then, many studies have shown the increasing interest of researchers in Differentiated Instruction and its potential to cater for the educational needs of the students (Heacox, 2012; Thousand et al., 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2003; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

The process is the way that the teacher directs the students towards the knowledge that is to be gained (Tomlinson, 2005), through activities that are designed to facilitate the understanding of the content (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). Consequently, the differentiation of process is the adjustment of the activities that a teacher will carry out based on the educational needs of the students that must be covered. Bailey & Williams-Black, (2008, p.136), suggest that "higher-order thinking, open-ended thinking, discovery, reasoning, and research" are strategies that a teacher can base his/her differentiation of activities on. Heacox (2012) suggests three ways to differentiate process; the adaptation of activities in order to become more complex and intellectually demanding, the engagement of the students towards a critical way of thinking and the availability of more ways than one to achieve their learning goals. The Differentiated Instruction Approach to teaching is a powerful tool for the English as a foreign Language (EFL) teacher that wishes to resolve the educational issues that seem to hinder the contemporary classroom which is characterized as mixed-ability. With the appropriate preparation, DI may appeal to the student and address several types of educational points in question and additionally cater for the professional involvement of the teacher.

### *The Immersion Teaching Model (ITM )*

#### **The History**

Language Immersion is a term that was first used in the 60s in the Canadian educational system in an innovating act that aimed to promote fluency and literacy in both official languages, French and English; more specifically, Canadians applied the French language as a medium of instruction among Anglophone elementary students (Cummins, 2009). During this instructional system, the learners are 'immersed' in an educational environment of which the only means of instruction is the target language. It is realized in three steps; early immersion for the very young learners of kindergarten, middle immersion for the 4th and 5th graders and late immersion for the 6th and 7th graders (ibid.). Johnson and Swain (1997) mention that historically the Canadian Immersion

program was not the first one to be applied, but rather the most intensively researched and therefore connected to the educational theories that underpin it (Cummins, 2009), which is why it is often mentioned in relevant research and contrasted with their respective contexts.

According to Mangubhai (2006), the teaching of a second language through Immersion is one of the most efficient methods of language learning; the use of its teaching techniques, which may serve many educational contexts, resulted in the creation of various subcategories, namely content- based instruction (Snow, 1998) or simply immersion (Swain, 1996). In the European educational setting, Immersion education is represented by CLIL which has drawn much interest amongst researchers (Gil et al., 2012) as a relatively new teaching approach. It is mostly focused on the learners' command of content and target language (Bruton, 2011).

### The problem

Barimani (2013) points out that one of the greatest problems in foreign language learning is that students who have studied a foreign language for a considerable number of years, are unable to communicate effectively with native speakers of the language when they are given the opportunity to interact in a natural environment. He further observes that in countries in which it was applied- i.e. Japan, Australia, e.t.c- the learners were able to successfully develop, not only a linguistic but also a communicative competence (ibid.). This conclusion is relevant to the Greek EFL context, as learners of English have no opportunity to interact with the target language outside the classroom, which renders the teacher in charge of manipulating the classroom environment and creating opportunities that lead to meaningful speech production and interaction amongst learners.

### The Applicability

The Immersion Teaching Model (ITM) is not the same as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and does not focus on traditional content teaching. This paper is based on the immersion program described by Luan and Guo (2011, p. 152) where the students experience an English only environment throughout their learning process and the "SL not only serves as the content of teaching but also [as] a tool for language teaching and acquisition".

Many researchers (Cummins, 2009; May, 2008; Mangubhai, 2006) have studied the characteristics of successful Immersion programs; Johnson and Swain (1997, in Barimani, 2013, p. 1362) list them as follows:

- The L2 is a medium of instruction
- The curriculum is the same as the local L1 curriculum
- Overt support exists for L1
- The program aims for additive bilingualism
- Exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom
- Students enter with similar (and limited) levels of L2 proficiency
- The teachers are bilingual

- The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community

These characteristics are easily applicable to the EFL context, except probably for the teachers' bilingualism, and are included in the teaching approach of the research project. Therefore, as the basic components of language Immersion are set, it becomes easier to use the teaching techniques that foster them.

As the Language Immersion programs are designed to teach content, it is essential to examine the applicability of the non-content focused Immersion Teaching Model (ITM) method to the EFL context. Mangubhai (2006) explains that language immersion programs aim to convey meaning through the teaching of content and therefore develop communicative competence amongst learners, which is also a salient feature of the Communicative Approach that is widely used in the EFL contexts. The existence of common ground between the teaching methods signifies the potential that they may hold when applied in the Greek EFL reality. Based on Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis that underlines the importance of a high amount of comprehensible input in class as an important variable for language acquisition, we can infer that both Immersion programs and the Communicative Approach (CA) incorporate this feature of language instruction in an attempt to create the opportunities for speech production amongst learners (Mangubhai, 2006).

Using the maximum L2 input in an EFL classroom is very important for language learners (Lee & Lee, 2011). The exclusive use of the English language, in order to teach English to Young Learners (YL), may require planning and lesson adaptation to meet the educational needs of the learners. The teacher is responsible for creating the appropriate environment, and for using the type of teaching activities that will cater and maintain the learners' intrinsic motivation, which YLs so easily lose (Cameron, 2007). Xu (2010), reports that the immersion teaching experience, increases learners' enthusiasm to communicate in the target language and at a higher frequency.

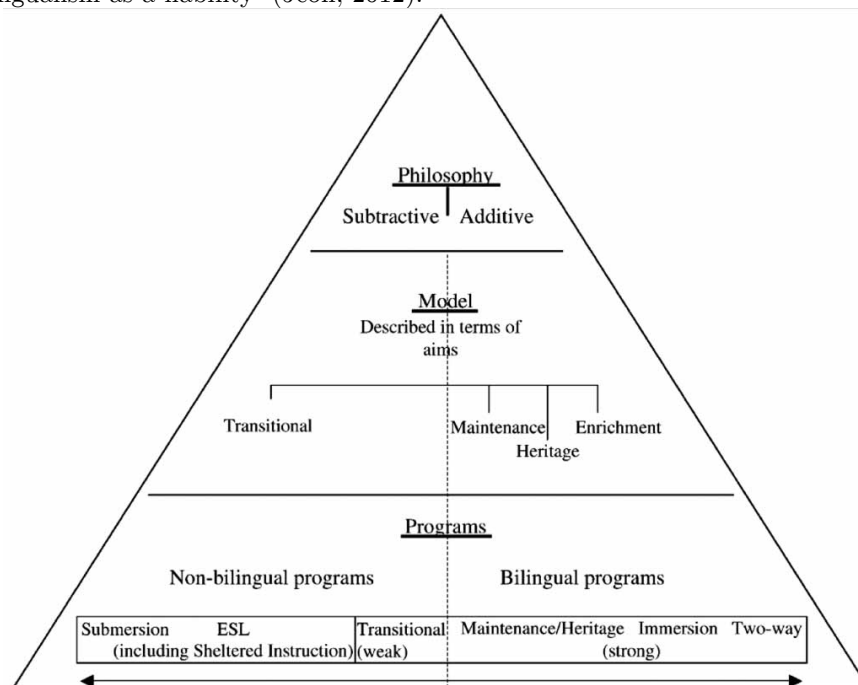
Although the Immersion Teaching Model's (ITM) basic feature is to deliver the maximum use of the target language, it does not strictly forbid the use of L1 from learners. Ho Lee's (2016) research concerning the views of teachers on the strict use of a monolingual approach in the class, revealed that 80% of the participants were either negative or neutral in forbidding the use of L1. For this reason, in the present case, before the teaching hour begins, a student is assigned as an assistant who may use the L1 for explanatory purposes and facilitate the communication between the teacher and the students as proposed by Luan and Guo (2011). In this way, possible communication breakdown is prevented and additionally, the students are given the opportunity to investigate and connect the two languages and construct knowledge on their own, which will also lead them to autonomous learning.

Mangubhai (2006) proposes several teaching techniques which are used in Immersion contexts that he believes to be valuable in an EFL setting; these techniques may not only increase target language production, but also draw more focus on meaning and consequently reduce the need for translation. The proposed teaching techniques are questioning downward, rephrasing, recasting, modeling/demonstrating and the use of visuals and realia, which are used in the designed lessons of the research.

### The Immersion Teaching Model in the EFL context

Since it was first used in Canada, the language immersion context of teaching has been adapted to accommodate the needs of several types of educational environments; it is therefore imperative to analyze its connection within an EFL context. In his research of language immersion programs in South Korea, Jeon (2012) uses May's (2008) typology to describe the basic aspects of Bilingual/Immersion programs that were however developed based on the North American and European models (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010) and understandably do not fit the EFL context.

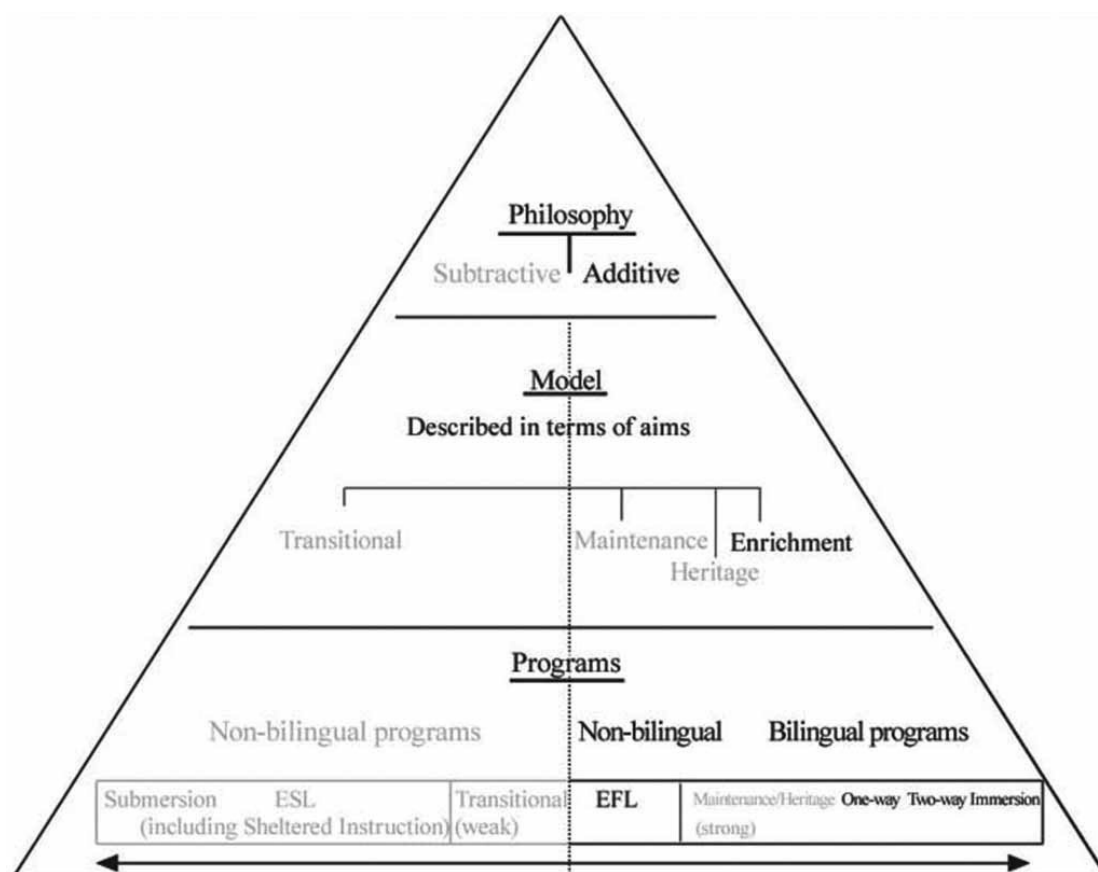
As shown in figure 1, May's typology examines Immersion Education in depth, starting from the philosophy that approaches Immersion Education both from an additive point -bilingualism as an advantage- or subtractive point -bilingualism as a liability- (Jeon, 2012).



**Figure 1:** May's typology (Jeon, 2012, p. 397)

Its teaching models may be designed based on the aims, that the respective curriculum commands, and the available programs that better serve these aims.

The Korean educational context that Jeon (2012) describes is similar to the Greek as they both fall under the EFL category. As May's typology does not adequately explain the application of such a model in the EFL context, Jeon (2012) proceeds to adapt it in order to fit the educational needs of the EFL context. For starters, he highlights the additive philosophy of Immersion Language Teaching in an EFL context as it welcomes language knowledge as an advantage to the learners', and also aims to enrich the said knowledge with cultural characteristics, as proposed in the Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum (IFLC, 2011).



**Figure 2:** Modified typology to fit EFL context (Jeon, 2012, p. 399)

The Language Immersion programs are therefore compatible with the EFL context as their aim is to assist the progress of English language learning and at the same time to foster the development of L1, not just the transition of instruction from one language to another (Jeon, 2012).

## Research Methodology

### *The research procedure*

The present research took place in a Greek state Primary School from the beginning of March to the beginning of April 2017 and lasted 10 teaching hours. The lessons were designed by the researchers based on the Immersion Teaching Model and the Communicative teaching approach. The students' speaking skills were assessed and recorded through the national foreign language exam system (KPG) speaking tests before the implementation of the ITM. Following the completion of the intervention that was also recorded for data, the students' speaking skills were once again assessed and recorded with a different KPG speaking test. The results of the pre- and post- speaking tests constitute the main point of comparison of the research. The research concluded with the students' interview in order to gather data for further analysis.



### *The aim and purpose of the research*

One of the main characteristics of the EFL context is that the learners do not have the opportunity to practice spoken discourse outside the classroom and therefore, when they are present at an English speaking environment, they are unable to cope with the communicative demands that arise within this environment (Barimani, 2013). For this reason, in the Greek EFL environment the teacher must create the opportunity to investigate potential interventions that will benefit the speech production of EFL learners and help them to overcome the anxiety that coincides.

The present Action Research (AR) uses a case study, i.e. a specific language classroom, that Nunan (1992, p.77) describes as a “bounded system”, in order to investigate speech development that occurs after the intervention of the ITM, which is applied in a 5th grade state primary school as a form of process differentiation. Furthermore, it aims to examine the feasibility of the said teaching model as well as students’ motivation and to prove the beneficial impact that a considerable amount of speech input may have on learners. The purpose of this AR is “to plan, implement, review and evaluate” (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 85) the ITM as a form of intervention that aims to advance the current teaching situation.

### *The hypothesis and research questions*

The research hypothesis of this work is that the ITM is more beneficial to the development of young learners’ speaking skills, than traditional foreign language instruction. To confirm the hypothesis, the researchers carried out an action research based on the following research questions:

1. Is the use of the Immersion Teaching Model feasible in the public sector of a Greek Primary EFL class?
2. Does the Immersion Teaching Model enhance students’ speaking skills?
3. Does the Immersion Teaching model promote student motivation to participate?

### *The research methodology: Action Research (AR)*

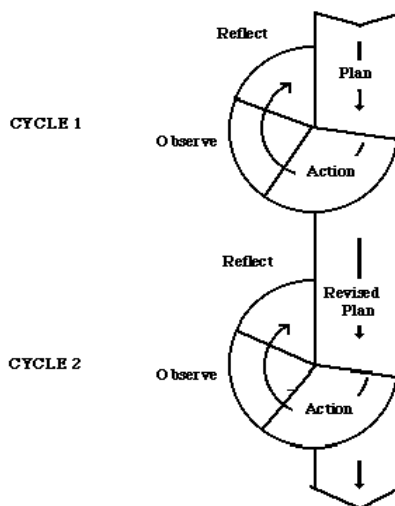
Although the interpretation of AR (Action Research) may vary from one author to another, it is safe to say that its core interpretation relies on the improvement of personal, environmental and professional aspects of practice (Aga, 2017). Historically, Lewin (1946) first referred to the term ‘Action Research’ in order to describe a research strategy for problem solving within the social context. It quickly moved to the educational context and gained acclaim through the work of recognized linguists (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; Stenhouse, 1975). The main reason that attracted the attention of the educational world, is that it relocated educational research from a wider area to a more specific one, where teachers are not only included in the research, but also identify with the parameters that describe it (Hopkins, 1993). Therefore, action

research (AR) places the teacher in the role of a researcher, whose research is narrowed down to identifying a problem that occurs in his or her teaching context and consequently resolves it within this same context (Naci Kayaoglou, 2015).

The method of application of action research resembles “a spiral of planning → acting and observing → reflecting → planning, and so on” as described by Richards (2003, p. 24), which was based on the earliest model of AR proposed by Lewin (1958).

Many researchers elaborated and adapted the model, proposing ideas and ways to execute it successfully (Ebutt, 1985; Elliot, 1991; Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

A recognized depiction of Kemmis and McTaggart’s (2000, p.596) action research is designed as follows:



**Figure 1:** Kemmis’ action research spiral (retrieved at <http://physicsed.buffalostate.edu/danowner/actionrsch.html>)

Elliott (1991, p.71) points out that one should closely observe the results before the evaluation stage.

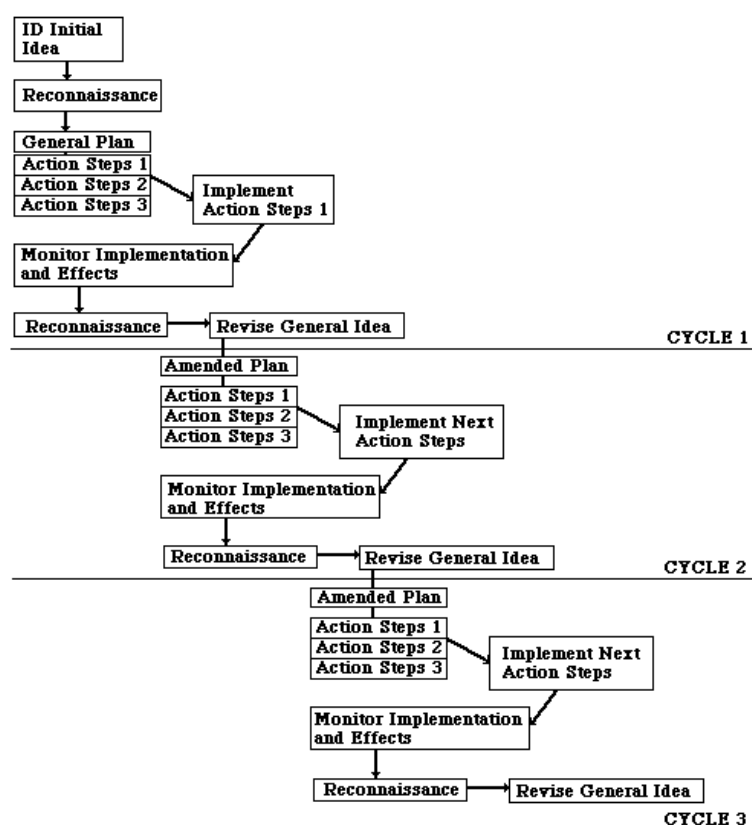


Figure 2: Elliott's (1991) AR model

In the present research, the planning of the action research (AR) was designed by taking into careful consideration the purpose of this research, its focus and topic, the data collection, the resources used in the research and the time needed to complete it, as proposed by Burns (2010) and Cohen et al. (2007) and described in this chapter. The act stage begins with the implementation of the national foreign language exam system (KPG) speaking tests and the application of the ITM intervention which was recognized as the possible solution and was implemented throughout 10 lessons. Another set of the KPG speaking tests provide the data for comparison, and further data are collected through semi-structured interviews and class recordings in order to acquire a clearer picture upon which to reflect. What follows is the review stage, where the data collected are analyzed and the evaluation stage, where the reflection of the findings take place.

## The study

### *Participants*

The target class of the present research is the 5th grade of a Greek Primary School that consists of 14 students, 7 girls and 7 boys, 10-11 years of age. The Integrated Foreign Language Curriculum (IFLC, 2011) indicates that at this stage of their education, their level of English competence is expected to be A1, according to the CEFR (2001). However, it is a mixed ability class and there is

variation of competence in speech production. The Greek language is the L1 for all students and they are taught English within the EFL context, although three of them answer to an additional linguistic repertoire at home. The curriculum in effect is the IFLC (2011) and the textbook is provided by the Greek Ministry of Education. The students are seated in a II shape, which facilitates student cooperation and interaction and promotes learner centeredness, which is the aim of the present research (Wannarka & Ruhl, 2008).

### ***Methods of data collection***

The AR (Action Research) data were gathered with quantitative and qualitative methods. The collection of quantitative data in action research is not a prevalent technique (Burns, 2010); however, it is used in the present research as it aims to document the development of the speaking skills in a primary school classroom, following the implementation of the Immersion Teaching Model, similar to the action research conducted by Uztosun et al. (2017). A mixed method was used for data collection which employed both quantitative and qualitative research tools to investigate the research hypothesis; the quantitative research tools provided the numerical data and the qualitative the non-numerical (Dörnyei, 2007). The combination of both types of data collection provides a more legitimate view of the researched issues, than the ones collected separately, and additionally secures triangulation that dictates the use of multiple data collection in order to ensure validity (ibid.). In the same fashion, the use of quantitative and qualitative data is acknowledged as acceptable for research which investigates the development of specific linguistic features of the target language (Hashemi and Babaii, 2013).

### **The KPG speaking tests**

A test, according to Cohen et al. (2007) is a legitimate data collection method. In the present research, the pre- and post- speaking tests, (the pre- (May 2015) and post- test (May 2016A) were retrieved at [http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/kpg/gr\\_A\\_Level.htm](http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/kpg/gr_A_Level.htm)). Both tests are derived from the examination procedure of the KPG and aim to provide the students' level of speaking competence before and after the teaching intervention. The KPG is the (Greek) National Foreign Language Exam System that aims to provide candidates with certificates that verify, through specific exams, their level of language competence and the accompanying skills that correspond to the aforementioned certificate which are based on the principles of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), establishing in this way its reliability (KPG, n.d.). As described in the KPG overview, (retrieved at [http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/kpg/files/KPG\\_Overview\\_2016.pdf](http://rcel2.enl.uoa.gr/kpg/files/KPG_Overview_2016.pdf), March 25, 2017), several types of validity are assessed through the examination of piloted and exam material, the results of which are verified by the Central Examination Board.

The results of the pre- and post- speaking tests are quantified data that provide an understanding on the effectiveness of the Immersion Teaching Model on the students' speaking skills. The six criteria of speech production, as formulated by the KPG are:

- Pronunciation and intonation.
- Lexical range and appropriacy of linguistic choices.
- Grammatical accuracy.
- Fluency.
- Communication strategies.

Cohesion and coherence.

The quality of the speech produced is measured with a five-point Likert scale (information retrieved at: [http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/files/KPG/english/A\\_level\\_oral\\_examiner\\_info\\_pack.pdf](http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/files/KPG/english/A_level_oral_examiner_info_pack.pdf)):

- 1= Unsatisfactory
- 2= Partly satisfactory
- 3= Moderately satisfactory
- 4= Satisfactory
- 5= Fully Satisfactory

The same Likert scale is used to measure the overall ability of the candidate to complete the three examination tasks. During the research, two different KPG speaking tests that were retrieved from the web page were implemented to the students before and after the ITM intervention, in order to investigate whether the proposed teaching method has contributed to the students' speaking enhancement.

### **The Semi- structured interview**

A semi-structured interview is the type of data collection method that is used by qualitative researchers due to the flexibility it presents and its framework that lacks structure (Edwards & Holland, 2013). It is characterized by a "given agenda and open-ended questions" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 97) which allow the researcher to manipulate the interview toward the direction that will elicit information on personal matters that are expected to serve the purpose of the research (Dörnyei, 2007).

In this case, the interview questions were designed to estimate the students' motivation towards the ITM, its feasibility as a teaching method, the students' perception of the acquired speaking skills, and furthermore to strengthen the research hypothesis. For this reason, the interview was divided into three categories of easy to follow questions, based on the suggestions of Cohen et al. (2007), which aim to investigate the aforementioned objectives. It also serves the triangulation purpose of the research, as it allows the researchers to access and interpret the data from a different perspective and therefore add to the research validity, which is also surged due to the participants' involvement in the action research (AR) implementation (Richards, 2003). The interviews were conducted in groups in the interviewees' native language and recorded in a friendly and familiar atmosphere at school in order to reduce the intimidation of a "face-to-face individual interview[s]" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 97). As it is the interviewers'

responsibility to provide an environment where the interviewees will feel safe (Alshenqeeti, 2014) in order to receive a rich production of data (Dörnyei, 2007), the students were given the opportunity to be interviewed in the language of their choice, and as expected, they chose their native language.

For feasibility purposes, the interview was pilot tested to a group of students of a relevant language competence level (Creswell, 2009).

### **Classroom recordings**

Another form of qualitative data collection is classroom recordings (Burns, 2010). All lessons taught during the present AR were recorded and carefully scanned in order to determine the “instances in the data to match those pre-arranged categories”, in a procedure known as deductive coding (ibid., p. 107). In the present research, the pre-arranged categories are formed based on the criteria of speech production of the KPG. The class recordings are valuable data for qualitative research (Richards, 2003) and aim to add to the validity of the KPG speaking test findings.

### ***Data Analysis***

As described previously, the present research used a mixed method to derive data, as its analysis is considered an important aid for the researchers and the decoding of the research findings (Dörnyei, 2007).

### **Quantitative data analysis**

The quantitative data consisted of the students' test scores that were collected from two different KPG pre- and post- speaking tests. The data was tabulated (Table 9, presented further down) and its variation was calculated in order to be depicted in graph form (Graph 7, Appendix I) so as to facilitate the understanding of the research outcomes. Additionally, the pre- and post- speaking tests scores were used to create a graph of the overall marking per student (Graph 8, presented further down), that allowed the researchers to compare and contrast the aforementioned in order to reach reliable conclusions. Furthermore, descriptive statistics were used to present the data values, a practice that is more common in the AR (Action Research) than the intricate statistical packages (Burns, 2010). The reason lies within the orderly manner with which descriptive statistics present data and the fact that they refer to a small scale research that cannot be generalized (Dörnyei, 2007), which corresponds to the typical features of the AR (Burns, 2010). For this reason, both the measures of central tendency- the mean, the medium and the mode- and the measures of dispersion- the range and the standard deviation- were calculated, in order to observe how the set of data connect to a central number and additionally examine their variability throughout the set of numbers (ibid., 2010). In more detail, the mean is the average number of the set of scores and its purpose is to give an idea of the students' average degree of effectiveness, the median is the central point of the

test scores that the students achieved and serves to show the scores that range higher or lower, and the mode is the number that is most often encountered across the set of test scores (Burns, 2010). The range is the number that indicates the extent that the test scores are dispersed (Burns, 2010) and the standard deviation number is an “index of average disparity among the scores” that contribute to a more precise account of the test scores (Dörnyei et. al., 2010, p. 97).

### Qualitative data analysis

The classroom recordings are a source of qualitative data that is categorized based on the KPG criteria of speech production, in order to validate the quantitative data that was derived from the pre- and post-tests (Burns, 2010). The data was analyzed according to the “four step model” suggested by Richards (2003, p. 185). More specifically, Richards (2003, p. 185) proposed:

- Step 1: Providing a general characterization;
- Step 2: Identifying grossly apparent features;
- Step 3: Focusing in on structural elements;
- Step 4: Developing a description.

This type of classroom analysis, served as the model upon which the researchers carefully examined the classroom recordings in order to connect them to the KPG findings that are categorized based on the six criteria of speech production (see 4.2.1), adding to their validity. More specifically, as mentioned earlier, the researchers used deductive coding as proposed by Burns (2010) and identified in the classroom recordings the instances of speech production of the students that correspond to the speaking skills that the KPG test examines.

Another source of qualitative data is the semi-structured interview. There is no established method in literature to analyze the data collected from the interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The researchers followed the coding method suggested by Cohen et al. (2007) and proceeded to categorize the findings into the three main sections that the interview was constructed upon, i.e. feasibility, motivation and speaking skills. These sections coincide with the research questions investigated in the present research, and therefore provide valuable information that lead to the construction of conclusions. In order to secure the credibility of the students’ answers, the researchers, which in this case acted as the tool of data collection, prompted them to answer the questions truthfully, informing them that there is no right or wrong answer (Legard et al., 2003).

In this case, the interview questions were designed to estimate the students’ motivation towards ITM, its feasibility as a teaching method, the students’ perception of the acquired speaking skills, and furthermore, the aforementioned research questions, strengthened the research hypothesis. The students’ responses were carefully scanned and connected to the aforementioned categories, with an additional division of positive and negative answers. In this way, it was easy for the researchers to gain an insight on the students’ attitudes towards the ITM and its feasibility in the EFL classroom.

## Research findings

What follows is a detailed description of the research findings per method of collection.

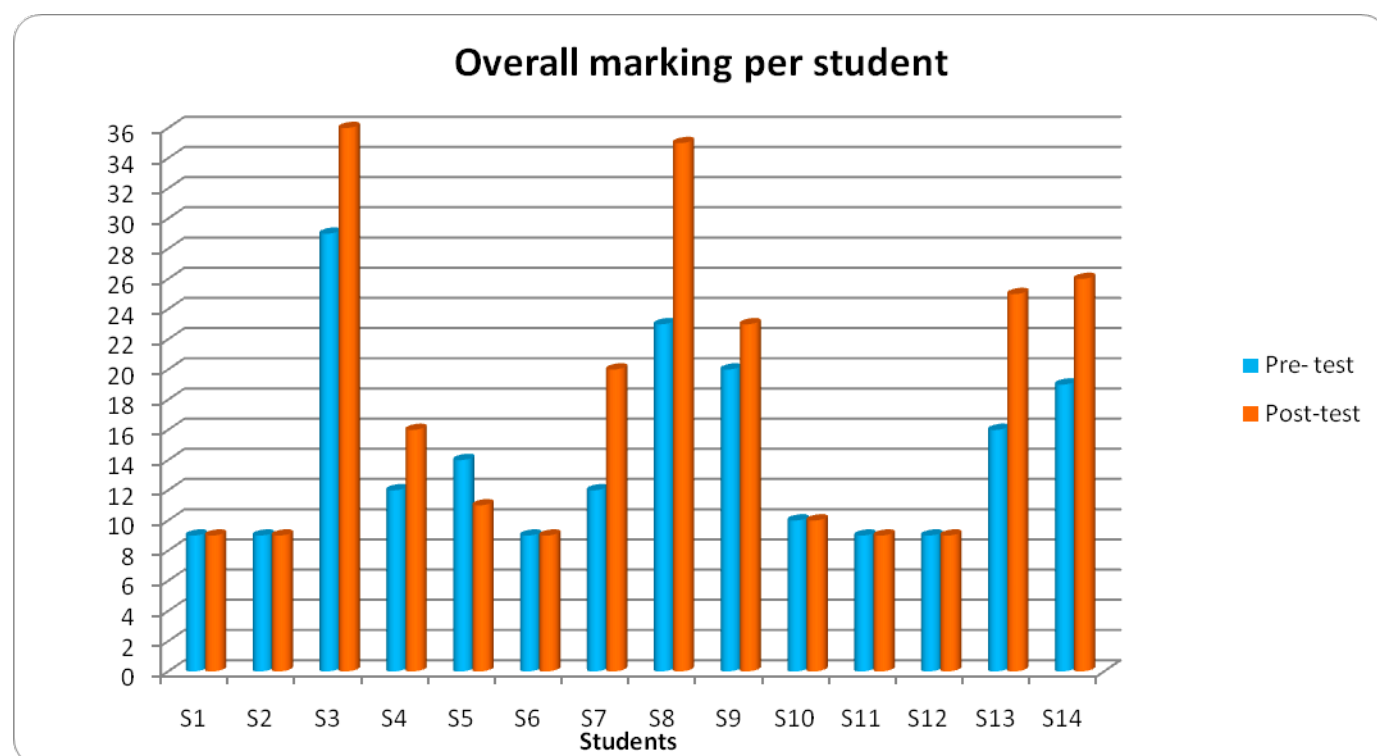
### KPG test result

What is interesting from the data in Table 9 and its counterpart Graph 8 below is that the improvement of oral output following the ITM intervention is evident for the students that scored a higher grade in the pre-test, while stagnation occurred for the students that scored a low grade in the pre-test. The results allow us to speculate that the effectiveness of the ITM is connected to the high level of competence of the students. The findings of this research are in line with Spezzini's (2004) research, who documented the connection between the students' difficulty to follow the lessons to their low levels of language comprehension.

**Table 9:** Overall marking per student

Overall marking per student				
Students	Pre- test score	Post-test score	Variation	Variation %
S1	9	9	0	0
S2	9	9	0	0
S3	29	36	7	24,14
S4	12	16	4	33,33
S5	14	11	-3	-21,43
S6	9	9	0	0
S7	12	20	8	66,67
S8	23	35	12	52,17
S9	20	23	3	15
S10	10	10	0	0
S11	9	9	0	0
S12	9	9	0	0
S13	16	25	9	56,25
S14	19	26	7	36,84





**Graph 8:** Overall marking per student

A comparison of the test results through the calculation of the mean, the median, the range and the standard deviation (Table. 10), shows an overall improvement of oral production skills.

**Table 10:** Comparison of test results

Comparison of test results		
	Pre test	Post test
Mean	14.29	17.64
Median	12	13.5
Mode	9	9
Standard deviation	6.32	6.91
Range	20	27

Although the data indicates an improvement, what is interesting to point out is that the mode, which is 9 and represents the lowest score of the test, remains the same in both the pre- and the post-test. Additionally, Table 9 indicates a 0% variation of the students that scored 9 and 10. This calls attention to the aforementioned assumption (Spezzini, 2004) that the ITM requires a higher degree of comprehension in order to serve its purpose. Furthermore, it allows us to think that the class is highly mixed and requires differentiation not only in the teaching process, but also in student readiness in order to cater for the lower level students (Heacox, 2012).

In a group distribution of the students' grades in Table 11, it is evident that a number of students present a shift from the lower grades group toward the higher grades group (Graph 9), demonstrating a speech production enhancement that

was possibly augmented by the English-speaking environment, which is a key factor for target language growth (see also Roskvist et. al., 2014).

**Table 11:** Group distribution of students' grades

Group distribution of grades: From-to	Central value of the grades	# of students in pre-test	# of students in post-test
[9, 14.4)	11.7	9	7
[14.4, 19.8)	17.1	2	1
[19.8, 25.2)	22.5	2	3
[25.2, 30.6)	27.9	1	1
[30.6, 36]	33.3	0	2

The numerical data derived from the KPG speaking tests are important for the present research as its evaluation indicates that the ITM intervention has benefited the spoken performance of the students. More specifically, the greatest improvement was detected in the category of fluency, while the category of pronunciation remained the same. Although fluency and pronunciation are usually connected in progress, it is not rare to notice a development in fluency only. Lord (2006), has found a similar pattern of development, where the students improved the ratio of production while pronunciation remained unchanged, suggesting that the phonological memory that students develop may benefit all areas of speech production.

### The findings of the classroom recordings

As described previously, the classroom recordings are a source of qualitative data that is categorized based on the KPG criteria of speech production, in order to validate the quantitative data that was derived from the pre- and post-tests (Burns, 2010). The data was analyzed according to the "four step model" suggested by Richards (2003, p. 185).

When it comes to pronunciation and intonation, the student's use of phonological features is not adequately manipulated and the effect of the Greek language is present. This phenomenon is the result of the student's lack of ability to successfully map and produce the sounds of the target language, often resulting in the adaptation of phonological features from both (Lord, 2010).

S: I see... eh...

T: ..a lot of..?

S:...a lot of..eh..

T:...posters..

S:...posters and.. bill..

T:...billboards.

S:Eh, eh.. [ in Greek: I don't know what it is called...]

T: Billboards. Try it!

S:Bi[l]boards..

T: Billboard.

S: Bi[ll]board.

T: Billboard.

S: Billboard!

T: Excellent!

Their lexical range is appropriate for the activity and although they use simple phrases that are characterized by pauses and repetitions, they manage to achieve the expected meaning rather appropriately, which will justify an improvement in this category. The acquisition of new vocabulary is cyclical and since we refer to young learners, we must point out that the process involves a pattern where children have to encounter and use the same words many times in order to fully comprehend its meaning and the way it is used, which results in repetitions and pauses (Cameron, 2007).

T: What is this Yianni, what is it called, this..?

S1: Eh... Water pollution.

T: Yes, why? What is this?

S1: Eh... because rubbish is near the river.

T: Excellent!

S2: [In Greek: I thought it were leaves]

T: No, no, it's not leaves, it's rubbish. Yes. So what do you see here? What is this?

No, what do you see? 'I see.'

S2: I see rubbish... at river...

T: So what type of pollution is it?

S2: Water pollution.

The produced speech is once again characterized by pauses and hesitations; however, it is mainly grammatically accurate in its structure and self-corrections occur, allowing the message to be conveyed rather easily. The self-correction of errors is a distinct characteristic of the language learning process and is mainly detected in instances of grammatical accuracy (Indriani, 2015), which in this case allows us to reach the same conclusion.

T: Why is the girl, in the first picture, happy? Why is she happy?

S: Eh, because she likes to /ri:d/ the bike. To ride the bike!

T: Excellent! Ok.

The students produce turns only within the limits of the activity and their speech is simple with false starts, hesitations and pauses, which justify their level of competence and don't necessarily tire the listener. Although the flow is clearly maintained by the teachers/researchers, activities with short interactive routines enhance the production of language (Cameron, 2007), and proper scaffolding by the teachers/researchers (Bruner, 1966) supports the innate drive of children to construct meaning and to communicate.

T: So, who is the bad guy, tell me.

S1: Eh. Batgirl is ... bad guy.

T: Batgirl. Ok, why? [quiet please!] Why is Batgirl the bad guy?

S1: Because, she is eh. medium, eh. she is blue eyes..., she is with red hair.

T: Eleni, do you have anything to tell me? What else?

S2: And also, eh..., she d..., she doesn't wear a jacket...

T: She doesn't wear a jacket, very good!

S2: Eh... she doesn't, eh..., have, eh...,

T: ...and she wears...?

S2: ...and she wears a mask.

Although the interaction is interrupted by annoyance, the speech produced is relevant to the requirements of the activity. It contains hesitations and repetitions due to the student's inability to recall the desired word (study), which he eventually replaced with its descriptive form (to read his books). These types of strategies that are employed by the L2 learner indicate a form of error analysis and evaluation, which enhance metalinguistic awareness and boost the improvement of L2 (Indriani, 2015), while additionally they augment the learning autonomy of the students.

T: Why is the boy unhappy in the second picture Yianni? Why is he unhappy?

[Key: "Because he doesn't like studying." (The picture shows a boy doing his homework)]

S: Because...

T: Please, sit down. [to another student]

T: The boy, here, is he happy or unhappy?

S: The boy is unhappy.

T: The boy is unhappy. Why?

S: Eh, because, eh, you haven't to... [T: He...] he hasn't to... because he hasn't like to read his books.

T: Excellent! He doesn't like reading; he doesn't like studying, so he is unhappy.

The speech produced was quite rational and connected to the previous information, although the teachers'/researchers' support is necessary to maintain the flow of the interaction at this early stage of language learning in order to construct meaning (Bruner, 1966). The students used simple connectors, i.e. 'and', 'because', which are important prerequisites of any cohesive narrative (Cameron, 2007) and although there were hesitations present, the organization of speech production was augmented.

T: How do they feel? Yianni?

S: Eh... they...

T: Are they happy?

S: They feel scared.

T: They feel scared. Why do you think they feel scared? Why?

S: Because ...eh... he... because they see an a... an angry dog.

### The findings of the Semi-structured interviews

In the category of feasibility of the ITM as a teaching method, the data collected indicated a positive attitude of the students in all the areas of this

research. However, there is an indication of frustration by some students due to their inability to understand the English language spoken by the teachers/researchers. This characteristic is connected to the students that are of a lower language level, as the teachers/researchers used simplified language that the rest of the students were able to decode and follow. Similarly, in a research conducted among EFL students, Trang et al. (2013) pointed out that the foreign language anxiety that most students face, is a common feature of the EFL classroom. It is interesting to report, though, that the vast majority of the students would prefer to continue learning in this way.

In the category where the components of speaking skills are explored, the data collected exhibits the students' awareness of the enhancement of their speaking skills. More specifically, their responses indicate a composed reaction concerning their improvement in all subcategories of speaking, however the vast majority agrees that the ITM has benefited each one separately, as well as their overall speaking competence. Similarly, Barimani (2013) supports the view that language immersion not only improves the speaking competence of students but also promotes its use in a flexible manner for everyday communication.

## Discussion

The present research implies that the application of the ITM is a feasible solution to EFL teachers/researchers which aims to reinforce students potential for speech production, and increase their motivation for learning English. The first research question investigates the feasibility of the ITM, and the research findings confirm that it was accepted well by the majority of the students although some of its characteristics were new to them. Many students confided difficulty in fully understanding their teachers who were also the researchers; but nonetheless, most of them revealed enthusiasm to continue learning in this manner (see also Luan & Guo, 2011). However, even though students showed a keen interest, those students with a low level of language competence revealed anxiety that affected their participation and understanding of the lesson procedures. This may suggest that ITM requires that students have an initial language level. More specifically for the mixed ability class of this research, a possible solution would be an additional differentiation in teaching that would cater for the educational needs of the students of a low level of competence, as language immersion is considered optimal for mixed ability classes due to its flexibility of application (Cummins, 2009).

The second research question, investigates the benefits of ITM in the students' speaking skills. The teachers/researchers adapted the textbook to include fun activities that the students relate to, and promote language practice through authentic material (Samuda and Bygate, 2008), bearing in mind the teaching techniques suggested by Mangubhai (2006). The quantitative findings and class recordings show improvement in most categories of oral production which complies with the belief that EFL students must be exposed to environments with opportunities to express themselves and communicate with others authentically in order to enhance their speaking competence (Oradee, 2012).

The third research question, investigates whether the ITM increased student motivation and therefore classroom participation. The interview data revealed increased student motivation that stemmed from the adapted lessons and the fact that they had the opportunity to interact in an English only classroom. According to the findings, the students thought that the activities were interesting and they enjoyed participating, although it was sometimes difficult for them to decode meaning, an obstacle that was overcome through the teachers'/researchers' intervention and through cooperation with classmates (see also Luan & Guo, 2011). As the intrinsic motivation of students descends with age (Corpus et. al., 2011), it is important for a teacher to redefine the teaching situation in order to maintain high levels of motivation that contribute to a meaningful educational outcome.

In conclusion, the research hypothesis that the ITM is beneficial to the enhancement of students speaking skills, is realized for the students of this specific class that hold, at least, an initial level of language competence, while further differentiation is needed for the students that have no competence in speech production.

### *Limitations, Implications, Suggestions*

Although the findings of the research are positive, it is important to discuss the limitations of the study. Due to the tightness of the school schedule the research was a small scale research; a long-scale research may have produced additional and in-depth results concerning the hypothesis, which would lead to integrated solutions. As the present AR (Action Research) is an intervention that aims to investigate a way to ameliorate speech production of a specific class, it cannot be generalized which consequently affects the external validity of the study (Dörnyei, 2007).

The positive findings of this AR (Action Research) are important for further consideration on the implication of language immersion in the EFL context. Language immersion in the Greek educational context is mainly represented by CLIL (see also Zafiri & Zouganeli, 2017), but given the flexibility it exhibits from its application to various sociopolitical and sociolinguistic contexts (Cummins, 2012) and the reasonable teacher preparation that the ITM requires, it renders it a promising form of differentiated instruction that complies with the directions of the IFLC (2011). What is important for the teacher is a thorough education on the methodology of language immersion and the meaning of differentiated instruction, in order to be able to adapt the lesson, which will confront the traditional practices and provide opportunities for lifelong learning and educational development (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

One of the skills that a teacher must possess is a good knowledge of his/ her class in order to be able to identify the students' weaknesses and their strong points, and create suitable teaching conditions that will cater for the educational

development of their students (Tomlinson, 2001) and the facilitation of a lifelong L2 learning (Papaefthymiou-Lytra, 2014). In the present research, the students of a 5th Grade Primary class participated in a differentiated instruction setting, using the ITM in order to facilitate and enhance their speech production. The students engaged in adapted activities with role-plays, interviews, games, songs and videos with the purpose to communicate in the target language and create motivation that will enhance their class participation and therefore speech production. The students exhibited a high level of participation and motivation to learn through the specific approach, although the quantitative findings of this research suggested that it was not enough for the students with a very low level of language competence. Therefore, the data interpretation partly supported the research hypothesis that the ITM is beneficial for the enhancement of students' speaking skills, as low-level English language students require further differentiation to support their L2 learning. Further research on the ITM might be valuable to the EFL teacher that seeks to find new methods to increase student motivation and create an instructional basis upon which he or she will be able to develop and strengthen the students' educational potential that will result in the enhancement of their communicative competence.

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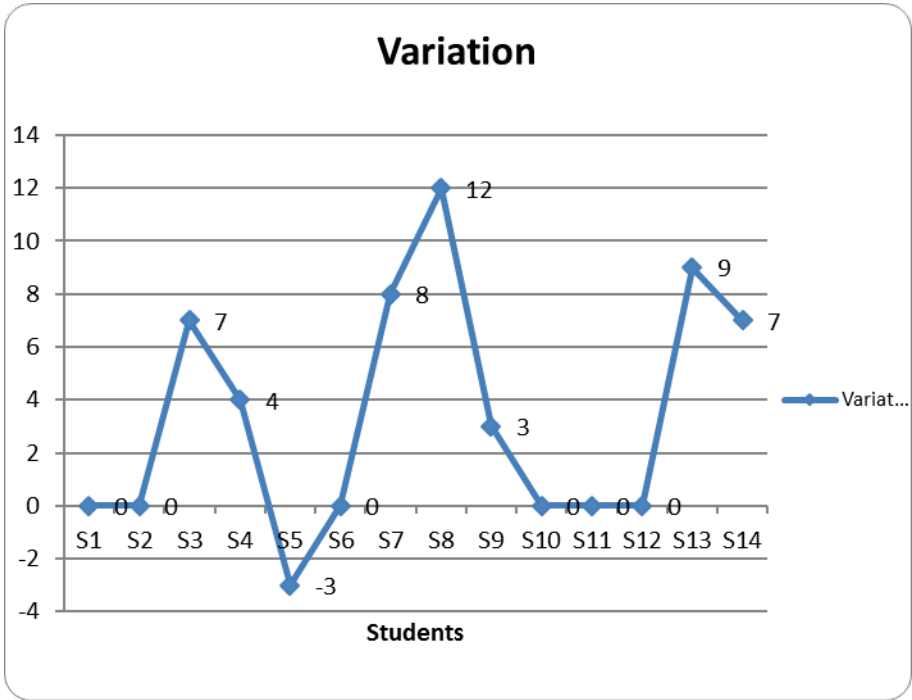
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Appendix I: Graphs



Graph 7: Variation of students' test scores